

Dr. Guillermo Torre-Amione interviewed by Donald A. B. Lindberg, March 31, 2010, Houston, Texas

Torre-Amione: I had the opportunity of getting to know him [DeBakey] the latter part of his life, very actively, although I trained here, and I spent almost the last 25 years of my life here in my training and my professional career.

Lindberg: Looks as if you must have started at age 12 or something.

Torre-Amione: Twenty-five. But almost anybody that trained here that's my generation has had an impact--DeBakey's legacy and his life, and whether you just participated in training at Baylor or rotation or you were in the field of cardiovascular medicine, there was almost nothing that you do that in some way is not a reflection of his career and his presence. So many of us that trained here and live here--just sort of an icon that's irreplaceable. And his figure is mythical and even if you don't have a direct contact with him, as I didn't for many years, you always feel his presence and his shadow. I don't know how much people talk to you about that, but when I was in training--this is 20-plus years ago--you would come into DeBakey rounds, and it was sort of a religious experience. In his 9th floor office he would sit in front of the x-ray machine, and he would look at the films, and he would make his notes, and he wrote the diagrams and then the faculty would sit behind him and give reports, and then the residents and the interns in the back, and just to be able to go into the room was a big deal, and you didn't have to say anything--but just the presence of the entire room just was overwhelming.

Lindberg: That's very interesting.

Torre-Amione: So that was for me my first contact with DeBakey, going through rounds with DeBakey was the highlight of the rotation, just to have that contact with him. I mean he carried that presence or aura around him.

Lindberg: So was that weekly?

Torre-Amione: Every day. DeBakey rounds were at four p.m. and then every consultant that worked in--and at that time he would have 100 patients admitted to the hospital. I mean it was incredible. They were times of no privacy of information. You would go to radiology and look at the list of patients who you have to select the x-rays and review, and you would see patient after patient of DeBakey, DeBakey--so it was a time in medicine where--you don't see that anymore. It just doesn't exist. Whether medicine has been transforming which--you just don't have individuals like that anymore. It may be good or bad but in any case, that's the way it was in the past, and just that experience was in and of itself an extraordinary experience. So throughout my training the presence of DeBakey was really a religious experience for anybody that practiced here. If you were in cardiovascular medicine--to a different magnitude. Now my personal relationship with him really developed the later part of his life when he became ill. He had a lot of physicians, and I was only one among a group of doctors that would meet with him. We would have meetings and sit in a conference room, pretty much the way DeBakey rounds were for other patients. Dr. DeBakey would come and then you have mostly very senior physicians, significantly senior to me, people that were his direct colleagues at that time in the school and so

forth. And then we'd review different aspects of his own personal care and discuss medication and discuss a strategy. Then I participated in the area of cardiology where he had--I suppose it's probably appropriate to mention his illness as it were.

Lindberg: Yeah, it was all over the newspapers, sure.

Torre-Amione: Yeah. He had developed a cardiomyopathy and some cardiac dysfunction at some point, and he was very aware of what his medical treatments were for that, and that was my area of expertise, and so I would come into the meeting and over time I developed a closer relationship with him. I was probably one of the most junior--I would say among that group, I was the youngest individual, so I developed a very nice relationship with him, and we would talk about different aspects of medicine, and then he would talk about life in general and the philosophy of medicine and how one should be open to different strategies. I think that he was very interested in the latter part of his life to really explore unconventional treatments that maybe would be perceived by us as maybe not necessarily alternative medicine, but just explore or keep your mind open to potentially new forms of treatment that may offer a unique or different approach, and I found that really fascinating because here you have someone who spent his life building foundations for scientific practice of medicine and surgery and cardiovascular medicine, and someone who is old by conventional criteria--but a mind that's very young and willing to explore unconventional strategies with a scientific twist. He didn't have the idea of magical cures. You know, "If it does work, why does it work? Let's explore this. It may be effective in this way." I thought that was fascinating.

Lindberg: You know he had a Chinese yew tree in his garden.

Torre-Amione: Yes.

Lindberg: I don't know if it was because of tamoxifen or just [that] he liked it, but he talked about it.

Torre-Amione: Yeah, and I don't think that's a common--I mean he must have had a unique set of genes that kept him pretty active mentally and even though, yes, he was biologically--He was perhaps even more open to change than many people my age or even younger, so I think that was—

Lindberg: Well, there are young old men.

Torre-Amione: --one of the things that--yes, I think that quality was one of--or maybe perhaps one of the lessons that I had the great pleasure of really learning from him directly.

Lindberg: He's one of the reasons I'll never vote for forced retirement at 65.

Torre-Amione: I think that's true.

Lindberg: Him and [Congressman] Claude Pepper.

Torre-Amione: Well, I spent, just like many other people here, a lot of time with him towards the end, and the week before he died, he continued to have ideas about developing a new pump or coming up with better strategies for support of the failing heart. He would talk about healthcare. I have to tell you that he always said, at least to me various times, he said the solution to healthcare is just to expand the VA system to the entire population.

Lindberg: I know.

Torre-Amione: He said we already have a system that works, just make it open to everybody. I frankly think that's a fantastic idea. I don't know why no other individual has pushed that--

Lindberg: And it's one that's ignored.

Torre-Amione: Right, I think people perceive it as socialized or whatever but the fact it is--

Lindberg: Well, he said that, on the occasion they awarded him the Congressional Gold Medal, to the president and the president, who had been pretty happy up until that [point], turned beet red.

Torre-Amione: I missed the opportunity to go to that one. I had a meeting that was scheduled in Europe. I couldn't cancel it, but I sort of regret not attending that.

Lindberg: It was sort of fun. Totally ceremonial but still it was fun.

Torre-Amione: I know, but it's a fun and a good experience to attend. So I mean the stories like that--if you ask me what's the greatest learning--you can talk to a lot of different people, they give you different stories on how hard he worked and his ethics and his commitment, but I think for me one of the greatest lessons from Dr. DeBakey was to work so hard and so diligent, and at least in my interaction which may be different at different stages of his life--was that his work ethic is just--

Lindberg: He never let up.

Torre-Amione: --incredible. I don't think that you have people that are so committed to that to the point that that becomes their sort of religion, their mode of life and without any interest in what people really would go perhaps today--I'll just share a story today--I was seeing patients today in clinic and a patient told me her primary physician had "fired" her, and the reason why he fired her. She said to me, "Well, you don't come often to the office. I've seen you in the hospital only one time last year, it's not worth my time to spend time with you. My practice is booming, I don't really need your money." Now what the real motives are, I don't understand that. To have a physician to talk to a patient like that, it's something that would be inconceivable in Dr. DeBakey's mind and the way he practiced medicine. I think that people have lost that over time, and I think if we needed to capture -- you can capture his greatness as a physician, as a surgeon, but I think these other aspects of the practice of medicine will be lost if we don't keep it alive, and I don't think we're going to have too many people that really practice like that.

Lindberg: He was a surprisingly scholarly man; did you ever talk Greek and Roman history with him?

Torre-Amione: No, but I talked about World War II. I'll share another story with you. I brought him to Monterey, my hometown in Mexico, and we had him attend a meeting with the chairman of the board who was also the chairman of a very large cement corporation, and we were sitting having lunch, and so he's talking about the history of cement with this man who's the CEO of this global company that at that time probably was the second largest cement company in the world, right, so Dr. DeBakey is talking to these men about cement, the history of cement and how cement has evolved through the years, and so I say, you know, I don't think he rehearsed it, but how did he end up--I don't think anybody had discussed with him what was this man's company. So he can handle that, he can handle everything. Right, so that was just one of these things--

Lindberg: That's interesting.

Torre-Amione: --that are very surprising.

Lindberg: I'm not surprised, but I'm very happy that you said it.

Torre-Amione: No, it's really remarkable, and I don't think anybody had briefed him on this individual's area of work. We were in an academic mission, just having presentations at the university had really very little knowledge put out.

Lindberg: Well, you know one of the things that he gave us--Katrin gave us--was his drafts of manuscripts, and he wrote *en Français* beautifully. I mean effortlessly. His last paper on healthcare for JAMA, it was just published as is, practically no corrections and certainly not ghost written, for sure not.

Torre-Amione: No, I understand that. Most of the memories that I have really revolve around these very important aspects of somebody's life that really transcend the practice of medicine, but I tell you I also took care of patients that he treated for many years, and we would go and see them, and he would make rounds at the age of 99, and we would come up with him, and he'd be on top of it and he would call them, and even late in his life he had the same dedication to take care of patients. He knew exactly what he should do. I mean he was really an incredible individual.

Lindberg: It amazed me as well.

Torre-Amione: I think the other important aspect--it's obvious because of his work, but I think if I look at myself, if I could be in a position of influence like him, I think it's very remarkable that you get an individual that could have personally benefited to a much greater degree of all his accomplishments. I think a lot of what he wanted to do and really the way he lived his life, demonstrated that. He wanted to build. He wanted to contribute. Baylor College of Medicine really developed because of him. The medical center here developed because of him, and his endowments, his efforts in trying to promote education and healthcare, even late in his life the high school that he founded, I think are very great examples that should serve as legacy for very

successful physicians to come. Where you can be very successful and happy, but these things that he contributed really transcend what you can do today, are part of his legacy that I don't think many individuals are capable of sharing that with the world.

Lindberg: No. Actually, the National Library of Medicine has an affiliation with Center City High Schools, and so I asked him about the success of the DeBakey High School here, trying to shape a strategy myself, and he said, "Well, Donald, first of all you've got to do it for 25 years." Then it will be different.

Torre-Amione: There's almost no one that you talk to in the medical center, even younger generations than me, that won't give you a story that may be this tradition or these incredible things that you hear that go from one generation to the other, but I think what everybody really feels and understands is that his contribution to what this medical center is is really unparalleled. I think his ethics, his work, his commitment to the patients are characteristics that you don't really find in a lot of individuals. And that doesn't happen often anymore.

Lindberg: No, unfortunately.

Torre-Amione: Especially the way medicine is changing. That type of commitment is not something that we're teaching people to do.

Lindberg: So do you still encourage young people to go into medicine?

Torre-Amione: Sure, but I usually tell people the following. People come in, they want to spend time. I said if your heart is not in medicine and you feel that you can do medicine just like becoming a lawyer or being a producer or being an engineer, do that. Don't go into medicine.

Lindberg: Yes, I agree.

Torre-Amione: But if medicine is what's going to make you happy, forget about the money, forget about the effort, then you'll be happy. But if you do it as a way to just find another job, I think that's not the right way to go into medicine.

Lindberg: Can't stand the first four years anyway.

Torre-Amione: Right, but I definitely encourage people when they know that that's their passion. The problem today I think is that people have--I don't think that we have a lot of people that still have that gift of finding something and doing it because of their passion. I don't see that a lot.

Lindberg: Well, do you think the DeBakey High School is working? I mean he really created it in order to get minority kids into healthcare, not medicine alone.

Torre-Amione: Well, I'm certainly no expert on the outcomes of--but we see kids that come through here, that come in and we have them through the summer or that they do volunteer work or they want to participate in research projects and without any question I think it gives people a connection with a reality that otherwise would not be available for them and just to expose

individuals that otherwise would not see this is really probably the greater engine to make them wanting to go into a career in science or medicine, so I think it's a fantastic idea and it's a fantastic program, yes.

Lindberg: I like it very well myself.

Torre-Amione: Yeah, so I think it's great.

Lindberg: I guess, one last thing is did he want to have the last giant arch [phonetic] procedure or not?

Torre-Amione: I talked to him about that and the answer is yes. He said he didn't want to die, and I, of course, talking to him after the fact, he never regretted it.

Lindberg: I've heard him say that.

Torre-Amione: He said he was very happy that he did have it.

Lindberg: Right.

Torre-Amione: And at some point that he made comments against it, he certainly doesn't regret having had it, and he was very happy to be alive. I'll tell you a story if nobody mentioned this. Dr. DeBakey, the last few months of his life--you know he loved cars and even sports cars.

Lindberg: Yes, oh, yes. Pedal to the metal.

Torre-Amione: He went and brought a brand new Porsche.

Lindberg: In a wheelchair.

Torre-Amione: I bought his old Porsche. I sat with him in the house. I said, Dr. DeBakey what are you going to do with this car, which was a beautiful Porsche that they had brought from Germany and didn't drive it for years because they had to make them US compatible. So there's this beautiful Porsche, and he wanted to go and buy a brand new Porsche, and he did. He went and bought a brand new Porsche and I bought his old Porsche.

Lindberg: Great.

Torre-Amione: Then I told Dr. DeBakey one time, I said, these Porsche people are pretty incompetent. If I was the manager or the owner, and I see you coming trying to buy a Porsche, I'll give it to you for free. I'll just ask one thing. I'll take a couple of pictures and use you in an ad, and I think it would be the greatest ad on earth about our selling sports cars. Of course, that didn't happen, but he bought his car, and he broke his car in, and he was really happy about that, and eventually he kind of died asleep, and the story is what it is. He was full of life even at that time. When he renewed his license to get insurance, he even made comments about, "Oh, I just need

insurance for another five years or so." Because he's 99, almost a couple months close to his hundredth birthday.

Lindberg: Well, it's kind of you to share the memories with us. We all knew him and all have good memories.

Torre-Amione: Very good. Thank you.

Lindberg: Thanks very much.